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ABSTRACT

The biggest concern with whole language instruction lies in ignoring some of the obvious problems in implementation or denying that there could be any problems at all. Problems mentioned by Maryland reading supervisors involve: teacher competence; phonics/spelling/skills instruction; responses of whole language advocates when asked what direction educators should take for children who fail when using the whole language approaches; assessment; and teacher accountability. It is only because people are trying things that they make mistakes. It is not bad to make mistakes; it is only bad not to admit them or to examine their causes. If whole language fails, it will do so because either too many people will do it poorly or it will be done by the staunchest advocates who demand such rigidity that there is no room for the kind of flexibility which research and logic say are essential when educators talk about human learning. The good news about whole language methods includes the following points: (1) there is an insistence on authenticity of real texts and on engaging children in real life functional literacy tasks that matter to them; (2) book reading is up in areas where literature is stressed in the classroom; (3) there is an increasing awareness of the uses of reading and writing together in content instruction; (4) teachers are excited and show enthusiasm about their reading programs; and (5) the kids are excited and enjoy learning and reading in whole language classrooms. (MG)

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THE GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS ABOUT WHOLE LANGUAGE:

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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The Good News and Bad News about Whole Language:

A Personal Perspective

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When I think about what has happened recently in reading instruction, I am reminded of an old saying "Be careful what you wish for because you might get it." Think of all the things we have wished for that have come about in large measure because of the interest in whole language. It almost seems like a dream come true. Get a picture in your head of the typical features of a whole language classroom.

You see a place where children meet language in a print rich environment in a natural setting that relates to their real lives. You see a place where children's literature is valued (in some cases almost worshipped). Whole language classrooms are places where the term wholistic fits a context where instruction in the language arts processes is integrated and where those processes are viewed as interdependent. The personal and social nature of literacy receive more than a passing nod; they lie at the heart of the process opening up marvelous possibilities for individual student growth. Finally, the word "empowering" has a ring of

truth not only for children, but for teachers who find themselves at the heart of a decision-making process which credits them with knowledge and judgement, which over the years many teachers found lacking in basal materials and county curriculum guides.

All of this is exciting; in fact, all of this is really good news and has added much to our profession in terms of the ways we now view the process of learning to read. At the same time, however, I am reminded of the immortal words of Pogo who declared. "We have met the enemy, and they are us." My biggest concern is that like religious zealots, in our exuberance we may ignore some of the obvious problems with our new found religion; worse still we may deny that there could be any problems at all with such a wonderful philosophy. That seems to me to be a dangerous course, so I'd like to call attention some of the bad news first.

In order to compile information on the good and bad news I called every county in that state of Maryland, and though I did not talk to all of the reading supervisors, I'm comfortable that I reached a pretty good cross section of the state. I asked the reading supervisors for the good news and the bad news about whole language instruction from their perspectives.

Aside from the problem of definition(people were reluctant to

respond until I told them What I meant by whole language), the number one problem mentioned could best be categorized under a heading of teacher competence. Some people expressed concerns about the staff development budget in their county; others were concerned about the level of training for teachers who claimed to be doing "whole language". At this point in the discussion supervisors often shared war stories about whole language classrooms. A typical war story was one about the teacher who said " You came on the wrong day. We only do whole language on Tuesdays and Thursdays." How about the supervisor whose own son is in a classroom where they are using trade books. How excited do you think she was to find her son coming home with a 50 word vocabulary list for each chapter. Of course, the child was required to look the words up in a dictionary before proceeding with the chapter. Another supervisor told me about the running fight she is having with a teacher who claims to be on the "cutting edge." This teacher claims to be using Nancie Atwell's wonderful book In the Middle , and she thinks she is doing reading workshop. Every Monday the kids have dialogue day to discuss their topics. On Tuesday they do spelling; on Wednesday they do focus lessons which this supervisor suspects come directly from Barnell Loft, and have no apparent relationship to what the kids are generating. The students then read on

Thursdays and Fridays while the teacher does their journals. No interaction with their peers, no discussion. And every time this supervisor criticizes the teacher, the teacher tells her that she is short sighted and clearly doesn't recognize the cutting edge when she sees it.

The war stories go on and on. Suffice it to say that unhappily in far too many instances whole language can be an excuse for bad teaching as teachers defend their practices as letting the kids get involved in the literature. And the problem for those of us who want the ideas embodied in whole language to succeed is that teachers who think they understand whole language and are really doing poor teaching threaten us more than our critics.

The second most commonly stated concern from reading supervisors could be subsumed under the general heading of phonics/spelling/skills. Let me illustrate with another war story. Recently, I had the opportunity to see one of the best first grade teachers working with a group of low functioning children. She embodies all of what I think is good about whole language. When the children were rereading a familiar story from a big book, they began talking about an interesting word; the word began with an "st", and the teacher asked her students if they could find another word on that page that began the same way. She then went on to a lively

discussion with the students of how the words sounded and continued on with the story. Another professor who was also visiting the room told me that up to that point, she thought this was one of the best whole language classrooms she had seen. But once the teacher tried to integrate phonics in a meaningful way with the story, this visitor declared that she was no longer "doing" whole language." The presence or absence of any type of phonics for this person was an absolute litmus test which the teacher obviously did not pass. For the most rigid of the whole language advocates phonics is an anathema; kids are supposed to learn the sound /symbol relationship naturally as they progress through meaningful materials. This is a great idea, and surely it works with many kids, but there is little research support to substantiate its occurrence for **all** learners. I think that the whole language folks have done the reading profession a great favor by focusing on the worst case scenario-- phonics worksheets in isolation. And certainly that scenario has played out all to frequently in many classrooms. I can't think of any sane professional who would advocate that approach any more. Phonics in isolation is scorned, but does that mean that we should systematically ignore over 60 years of research which has time and again indicated that early knowledge, understanding, and application of letter /sound relationships has a strong positive effect

on beginning reading achievement? I can't ignore it. For me the legitimate question is how do we help early readers discover this sound/symbol relationship in a meaningful way within the context of the reading act. And if some form of direct instruction is appropriate in the context of the total reading act, I think we are on firm ground in using that approach. And what about spelling? I think that the notion of invented spelling is terrific. It is absolutely freeing for teachers and students alike. Seeing the progression of spelling ability is actually awesome. But does that mean that there can never be a reason for direct instruction in spelling? Isn't there a point sometime --4th grade, 8th grade, 10th grade whenever-- when we expect that students when they write spontaneously (in an exam, taking notes, jotting a note to a teacher, writing a memo to their boss when they are in the world of work --when we expect them to spell correctly. And if there is a point when we expect them to spell basic words correctly, isn't there also a point at which direct instruction in spelling may be appropriate, at least for students who didn't spontaneously become spellers as we have been promised? Again, do we ignore all of the powerful research on the value of direct instruction? Or isn't the real question when and how much direct instruction is appropriate?

And what about strategies (skills is such a bad word that I dare not even use it). Again, the whole language folks have done a fantastic job of sensitizing us to the fact that you really can't fragment reading like we used to do in the 70's. We've always known that the scope and sequence charts were not carved in stone. But those charts did at least give some sense of a progression which might be sensible. Are we comfortable that teachers have enough knowledge of the reading process to be able to make informed decisions about what types of strategies to help kids focus on? And are we comfortable that what we end up with isn't merely a shotgun approach shaped by the particular knowledge and biases of an individual teacher? I'm afraid that takes me beyond my comfort level especially for beginning reading.

The third major problem mentioned by reading supervisors concerns the response of whole language advocates when asked what direction we should take for kids who fail -- for kids who don't spontaneuosly learn all of the intricacies of the written language system through wonderful exposure in a print rich environment. The answer invariably is to continue to do more of the same thing. I think we should have learned enough from the First Grade Studies in the mid-sixties to believe that no one method works for everyone. Are we to throw out the findings of all of those

studies? I'm not willing to do so yet. My real fear with reading failure is that whole growing group of children that we label "at risk". They are the very ones , it seems to me, who may need a combination of approaches. They certainly need a print rich exciting stimulating environment to move them along toward success. But we know too that children who start behind have to move faster and more efficiently if they are ever to catch up with their more advantaged peers. Direct instruction is the most efficient methodology we have. Especially with this group of at risk students we may not have the luxury of waiting for them to "discover" everything. I am not saying to do this to the exclusion of all of the wonderful things we have come to associate with whole language, but that a balanced approach may be best for this group.

A final concern involves assessment. Whole language advocates sniff that the current assessments don't measure what we are teaching. This is probably true. But the bottom line is this: we are involved in this country in publicly financed education, and the public-- like it or not -- has an absolute right to accountability. We can't say merely "Trust us. The kids are excited." More than one supervisor related to me with some degree of sadness the fact that the schools which had the most exciting whole language programs have test scores that have dropped precipitously.

Now I have no doubt that if this is the case, the tests that are being used are not appropriate to reflect the good things about the whole language programs. The it is time to get a different type of assessment or we will soon find ourselves back in a skills management program which is easily "measurable and well understood by the public.

Finally, there is the issue of teacher accountability. Those of us who have worked hard for many of the changes embodied by the whole language movement cannot afford to have teachers who think they are on the "cutting edge" simply excuse their poor teaching. And also because of the need for teacher accountability, I think we need to re-examine the place of the basals that we have all been bashing for so long. Basals have come a long way, as all of us have in reading. The manuals of some of the newer series reflect much of what is good and current in reading instruction. They have author teams headed by some of the best minds in the field. The manuals give teachers guidance but lots of choices. The books reflect many of the best current practices that we know about in education today. I'm sure that there are some -- maybe even many -- knowledgeable, creative, energetic teachers who can make whole language work and never need to refer to a basal or a basal manual. But my consistent observation is that for the vast majority of teachers, their

instruction would be improved if selected the best of what is available both from the basals and from trade books. Likewise basals may be appropriate for beginning teachers. Are we as a profession confident that after one or perhaps two college methods courses, beginning teachers are competent to make well - informed decisions based on kid-watching and on their own knowledge of the reading process? I'm not. I am far more comfortable for a first year teacher to have a well developed basal program to touch base with and use for guidance. For those teachers who need no help at all from publishers, that is fantastic, but let's not yet remove the safety net from those folks who need one.

Well, that's the bad news, and when you think about it, it's not so bad. It is only because people are trying things that they make mistakes. It's not bad to make mistakes; it is only bad not to admit them or not to examine their causes. What has happened is that lots of good theory is being put into practice with varying degrees of success and efficiency. I bring up the problems not because I don't believe in most of the underlying assumptions about whole language, but because I believe them very much. And if whole language fails, my sense is that it will fail for one of two reasons. Either too many people will do it poorly, and war stories such as the ones I have mentioned will become too numerous to accept. Or it will

be done in by its staunchest advocates who demand such rigidity that there is no room for the kind of flexibility which research and logic tell us are essential when you talk about human learning. Both of those notions scare me. It seems to me more than a little ironic that a group of people such as the whole language gurus who have taught us to be so flexible and accepting of the behaviors of children can turn around and be so rigid and judgmental when it comes to the behavior of their colleagues. My plea is for more dialogue, more openness and more willingness to examine all educational practice based on research and real kids.

But I want to deal with the good news too, and there is plenty of it. The reading supervisors I interviewed listed as great news some of the philosophical insights given to us by the whole language folks that I think have altered the way many teachers approach reading. For instance, the insistence on authenticity both in terms of real texts and in terms of engaging in the kinds of real life functional literacy tasks that matter to kids is a giant contribution. The basic assumption that kids are born to succeed in literacy tasks and that what we should expect is literacy seems to me to be the appropriate beginning assumption for all learners who enter our schools. The stance of risk - taking which values invented spellings and invented pronunciations and inferring phonics rules are

likewise good starting points and have added an important perspective in our understanding of the reading act.

There are some wonderful effects of reading good children's literature. By all accounts book reading is up in areas where literature is stressed in the classroom. In the same places library memberships for children are up demonstrably. In a nearby county, we have received calls from the local bookstore which is part of a national chain wanting to know what's going on because their children's book sales were so high in the Westminster store compared with other stores in their chain.

In addition, I think that the recognition of the parallell nature of reading and writing has led to wonderful explorations by teachers of the limitless possibilities for writing in combination with reading. Beyond journals and writer's workshop, there is an increasing awareness of the uses of reading and writing together in content instruction as well. All of this is very positive.

Certainly, teacher enthusiasm belongs on any list of positive effects of the whole language movement. I can't think of a time when I've seen so many teachers so excited about reading. Teachers are writing articles; teachers are presenting in conferences; teachers are doing research -- all in greater numbers than ever before. Teachers speak well

for themselves. Here are some direct quotes from teachers who were asked about their reading programs which had a whole language base. One teacher said "I can't imagine what I ever did before. No wonder the kids didn't use to like reading. Now they ask to have more of it. Last week while students were writing, they were given an opportunity to go to another area and watch a movie. Every single child chose to remain and write. I never thought I'd live long enough to see that happen." A teacher who works with children in an early identification program wrote: "The same children who used to groan when I started reading instruction now get excited when poems and songs are brought out. They get upset if I skip just one chart. You won't believe this, but during their free time many of the children now choose books instead of toys." A teacher in a special needs class wrote about two students she has who have Down's syndrome and were labeled as non readers. She wrote: "Now they can recognize vocabulary from their Big Book. Instead of 'Nat is a fat cat', they now recognize words like dress, sneakers, and bandana." One of my favorite letters is this one "I was really burned out and had considered leaving teaching. I figured with less hassle I could make more money selling real estate. Now I am excited about the literacy development of my students. I get really charged up listening to them share their ideas about books

with each other. I can't believe that 4th graders sit around and talk about their favorite authors. How many adults do that? Think of what these children will be like as adults. I'm psyched, and I didn't even have to sell real estate."

Finally, the best good news comes from the kids. As a profession, we have claimed for a long time that our goal for reading has been students who can read and do read. We've spent a disproportionate amount of time worrying about the "can read " part, and what we have turned out in the past in large measure is students who don't read. The students speak well enough for themselves. Here are some quotes from students who were asked to write their opinions. About writer's workshop one student said " Before this year I had a fear of writing stories. Now I love to write fiction." Another student said: " I liked the writer's workshop, but what I didn't like was the fact that we only had 50 minutes for each class. That doesn't give you much time to write." The teacher assured me that this was a youngster who would not have enjoyed writing for 50 seconds before, but now found 50 minutes too brief. Finally, here are some of my favorite quotes from a fourth grade class. One youngster in a lower reading group wrote "Why didn't we do this all the other years?" Another child said "When we get older , we'll know more. We can use this

when we grow up." One child liked whole language but was not too concerned about his academic future when he wrote "I hope I fail 4th grade so I can come back and do all this neat stuff." And my favorite quote obviously written by one of the worst readers in the class "Maybe if we did this all the other years Me and Ryan would be in a higher group." Do we need any more encouragement than that?